DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 511 CS 004 779

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TITLE Critical Reading and Thinking Skills in Programs for the Gifted Child.
PUB DATE May 79
NOTE 13p.; M.A. Thesis, Kean College of New Jersey

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Critical Reading; Critical Thinking; Curriculum Design; Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Planning; *Curriculum Research; Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted; *Reading Programs

ABSTRACT

When 60 reading specialists were asked to evaluate the reading programs for the gifted in their schools, most of the 20 people who responded indicated that their school districts had programs for the gifted, but that these programs were just beginning. The respondents, most of whom taught remedial reading rather than reading for the gifted, indicated that the following factors were important in a reading program for the gifted: a large percentage of time must be spent developing critical reading and thinking skills, diversified materials should be presented to the students and higher cognitive questioning should be implemented, and the gifted child should be encouraged to express ideas without fear of being criticized. (RL)

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CRITICAL READING AND THINKING SKILLS IN PROGRAMS FOR THE GIFTED CHILD

by

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
to
Kean College of New Jersey
May, 1979

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ABSTRACT

A study was done to determine if critical reading and thinking skills were included in programs for gifted children. Results indicated that critical reading and thinking skills were an integral part of gifted programs, but it was also noted that some districts did not yet have gifted programs.

New research related to an analysis of intelligence indicates that there are a great number of thinking abiliies, according to Guilford (1960). Of the five classes of ability, the fifth has to do with evaluation or what is commonly termed critical thinking. The major types of thinking as indicated by the structure of intellect are divergent production, convergent production and evaluation. Teachers should stir the students' imagination with various materials. Skilled use of questioning is also necessary.

Critical reading as indicated by Huus (1968) requires the evaluation of the material being read, comparing it with known standards and norms and concluding or acting upon judgment. The skills needed to accomplish this are abilities in inference and evaluation. First inferring is necessary, then evaluating the inference against experience and other data, and finally inferring and judging again. In reading, the reader must consider three major areas in being critical: the author, the content and the style.

Critical reading for the gifted, according to Trezise (1978), must go beyond lower cognitive levels: these children should be encouraged to summarize and paraphrase. Critical reading skills should be taught consciously to gifted children. Developing critical reading skills should be a basic objective of a reading program for the gifted.

Trezise (1977) points out based on his research that

instructional emphasis should be on comprehension skills including critical reading skills and creative reading, not just decoding. What is important in reading programs for the gifted is to stress objectives that fall under the category of comprehension skills or creative and critical skills.

A reading program designed for the gifted child should place emphasis on comprehension rather than decoding skills. Gifted children generally acquire decoding skills with a minimal amount of structural reading instruction; therefore, critical and creative skills should be stressed.

It is also beneficial to group gifted children with others of the same ability in order to discuss materials read on a level beyond that of normal children. Grouping also helps alleviate the feeling of isolation that some of these children often feel.

Critical reading should be implemented in classroom teaching. It encourages the student to read more carefully; that is, he must ponder what he has read. The ability to read critically is the mark of a mature reader. Gifted children should be encouraged to make judgments about what they have read. The task of developing critical reading skills should be a basic objective of a reading program for the gifted.

Despite all of these views, this question remains to be answered: "Are critical reading and thinking a part of

the reading program for the gifted child in the public schools?" Is the gifted child encouraged to think as he reads? Is critical reading given sufficient emphasis in reading programs for the gifted children?

Hypothesis

For the purposes of this study, it was hypothesized that gifted children are not adequately instructed in the use of critical reading and thinking skills.

If the hypothesis is rejected, then it will demonstrate that gifted children are given adequate instruction in critical reading and thinking skills.

If the hypothesis is accepted, then it will demonstrate that gifted children do not receive appropriate instruction in critical reading thinking skills.

Definitions

Gifted children for the purposes of this study are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. Lyon (1974)

Critical reading is defined as reading that requires personal judgment and evaluation. At this level, the reader forms generalizations, draws conclusions, and compares, analyzes and applies ideas gained in reading. Lerner (1976)

Instructional Procedures and Sample

In order to evaluate reading programs for the gifted, a questionnaire (appendix A) was developed that dealt with various aspects of teaching critical reading and thinking skills. It was sent to sixty reading specialists throughout the state who received their Master's degree at Kean College. These teachers were chosen at random and, prior to receipt of completed questionnaires, it was not known if they taught gifted children.

These teachers were asked to estimate the percentage of time spent developing critical reading in their classroom. They were also questioned as to whether they felt that reading programs for the gifted were given sufficient emphasis in their school district.

Additional information to be obtained through use of the questionnaire included materials implemented in the various programs as well as methods and approaches that were beneficial to gifted children. The specialists were asked to include any type of questioning that they developed to promote critical thinking skills in their students. They were also asked for additional comments about programs that they felt encouraged critical reading and thinking in gifted students.

Results

Although sixty questionnaires were distributed, only twenty were completed and returned, four could not be delivered and thirty-six went unanswered. The sample, 18% of the total distributed, is small but adequate for the purposes of this pilot study. There were eight questions on the questionnaire; each is referred to below.

The first question dealt with whether the teachers responding taught critical reading to gifted children. Eight answered yes and twelve said no, but three of those replied to some of the questions based on knowledge available to each. The results, therefore, would show percentages greater than 100% if such figures were utilized.

When asked if the respondent placed more emphasis on comprehension than decoding skills, nine responded yes and one said no. One teacher placed emphasis on decoding in the primary grades and comprehension in the intermediate grades.

Question three concerned the amount of emphasis given to critical reading and thinking in reading programs for the gifted. Four felt their school districts gave sufficient emphasis to critical reading in gifted programs, six stated the programs were given insufficient emphasis and one did not respond.

Answers to the question pertaining to the percentage of time spent developing critical reading and thinking skills

varied form "very little" to "all the time." Half of the responses ranged between 21% and 60%.

A wide variety of answers were given to question five which dealt with types of materials implemented in teaching critical reading to gifted students. Some suggested the use of the basal text supplemented with newspapers, magazines, films, games and teacher-made as well as audio-visual materials. Some teachers felt it was advantageous to use such materials as SRA and Reading Practice Program. The IRA publication, Reading Programs for the Gifted and Anita Harnedek's Thinking Skills Series were mentioned as possible guides for teaching critical reading and thinking skills.

The respondents felt higher cognitive questioning should be used with the gifted child. They preferred to use questions along the line of Bloom's taxonomy as well as deductive and inferential reasoning. One teacher recommended the book, Classroom Questions: What Kind by N. Sanders to promote critical thinking.

Two approaches that seemed beneficial in promoting critical reading and thinking were listed as " providing a wide variety of reading materials" and "spending more time discussing what was read." Utilization of the student's interests as the basis of reading also helped develop critical reading.

Question eight asked for additional comments that the

teachers felt might be pertinent to critical reading and thinking skills in gifted programs. Responses suggested that materials should be chosen that would challenge rather than discourage. It was also noted that a child's response should not be criticized because it would inhibit free thinking.

Implications and Discussion

Although this study is limited due to the number of responses received, it was found that almost half of the respondents taught critical reading, the remainder teaching remedial reading. A few of the latter, responding based on information available, rather than experience, were added to the sample to provide evidence on what was occurring in districts.

Based on the above, it would appear that although 30% of the graduates in reading responded, only 18% had knowledge of gifted programs and that 13% were engaged in teaching reading to the gifted. It would appear then, that a number of districts emphasize reading for the gifted.

In programs for the gifted, it would appear that the emphasis is on comprehension with approximately 40% of time being spent of developing critical reading.

Most of the respondents implemented a wide variety of materials to teach critical reading to gifted children. Some felt chat the basal reader might be used if it was

supplemented with additional resources such as magazines, games and audio-visual materials.

Teachers of gifted children felt the questioning used should be on the higher levels of a taxonomy such as Bloom's and that this should deal with evaluation and appreciation. Many respondents felt deductive and inferential reasoning should be employed with the gifted child.

In programs for the gifted, some responded that using diverse reading materials as well as spending ample time discussing what was read was particularly beneficial. Materials dealing with the student's interests were also helpful in developing critical reading.

Materials must be chosen that are challenging, not discouraging, to the student. Free thinking should be encouraged by listening, not criticizing, the student's ideas.

In this study, it was found that most of the responding graduates taught remedial reading rather than reading to the gifted. Most of the respondents said their school districts had programs for the gifted, but many implied that these were in the beginning stages. The gifted child has just recently come into focus in many districts across the state.

Respondents stated that critical reading should be an integral part of the reading program for the gifted.

It was also noted that teachers should implement higher cognitive questioning with the gifted child. Use of deductive and inferential reasoning, it was stated, can be beneficial to these students. It is also pertinent to think about the child's feelings when employing materials in teaching critical reading. Materials should not be too difficult as to discourage the students, nor should their answers be criticized, thus limiting their free thinking.

This study showed that some definite factors should be included in a reading program: a large percentage of time must be spent developing critical reading and thinking skills, diversified materials should be presented to the students and higher cognitive questioning should be implemented; finally, the gifted child should be encouraged to express ideas without fear of being criticized. These are pertinent factors in developing critical reading and thinking skills in the gifted child.

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